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of the Paulist Fathers



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*May I not trust, by gracious bonds of prayer,
Our souls are linked in such a wondrous wise,
That no poor plea of mine, alone, need rise
Before God's throne to sue for pardon there;
That to award me stripes He will forbear,
Moved by some spotless saint's redeeming sighs,
By little fingers clasped and love-deep eyes
And baby-lips imploring Him somewhere;
That in the midnight, even while I sleep,
The trembling worship of the starry sky
And murmured praises of the heaving deep
Accord with some dim cloister's vigil-cry
Of chanted orisons that upward sweep
To intercede with Him for such as I?*

The Communion of Saints

MANY people misunderstand the phrase "Communion of Saints." To the mind of the trained Catholic, however, it recalls a clear and simple doctrine, remarkable at once for lofty idealism and for practical bearing upon common daily life.

The Communion of Saints means that all God's children constitute one great family, held together by spiritual ties more intimate and more enduring than those relationships of flesh and blood which group men in household or tribe or race. To be a child of God implies solidarity with all other children of God. The communion involves a kinship transcending time and space, binding together in true and lasting kinship, prince and pauper, scholar and adventurer, orphan waif and world-famed hero, the children of God now alive and those who, long centuries ago, passed into eternity.

In a word, the dead, the living, and those yet to be born, become brothers and sisters in spirit and in love because Christ is their elder brother and God the Father of them all. Living or dead, everyone is kin to all the others. There is a give and take of assistance and of merit from this man to his neighbor, from the saint in glory to the pilgrim upon earth, to and from the living and the souls of those who dwell in Heaven's purgatorial waiting chamber—from each according to capacity and to

each according to need. For there is among them all as in the most perfect form of family life, true community of possessions.

IN DAILY LIFE

Thus stated, the solidarity implied in the Communion of Saints seems hardly less than startling. It means literally "each for all and all for each." Possessing the sacrosanct character of an article of the Apostles' Creed, it also has influence over the daily conduct of the average man. It abides in the common consciousness, not as a poetic dream or fine spun theory, but as a human fact of thrilling interest, something to be taken account of when we give an alms, when we wrestle with temptation, when we say our morning prayers. Here again then, is a new illustration of the general law that the divine idealism of the Catholic Church is well adapted to the common daily need. And that law gives the reason why the Church can lead ordinary men and women to ready belief in truths as divine in beauty as they are homely in application, truths which appeal to the philosopher meditating upon eternity and at the same time to the little child learning the rudiments of Catholic doctrine at his mother's knee.

A WISE TEACHER

For the Church is wise, with the wisdom of God. And she teaches with a skill born of world-wide, age-old experience. In season and out of

season, by every means available, she carries on her Master's work, and teaches all the nations.

When a genius works, every stroke tells. Each line upon the canvas, each blow upon the marble, each touch of string or key, is made with a definite purpose and helps to produce the desired result. No false note or wasted word mars the achievement of great singers and great orators. If a master teaches, no argument or illustration is meaningless. So in the activity of God's representative, the Church, nothing is ineffectual. Incessantly active in the four quarters of the globe, and in every century of the twenty she has lived through—yes, and in every year and month and day of them—she promotes human sanctification by every doctrine she teaches, by every commandment she promulgates, by every divine principle and every human fact she sets so insistently before the upturned eyes of the world for sentiment and imagination and memory to seize upon. This characteristic can be seen clearly in many of the Church's doctrines, and with more than ordinary clearness in her teaching of the Communion of Saints.

ATTRACTIVE SAINTS

For in the education of the human race, the great world teacher makes large use of the saints. Others recognize, or revere, or perhaps occasionally even invoke them, but her practice is distinctive; it is hers alone. That practice encounters censure frequently enough; carping critics have created a

prejudice against the very name of "saint." But when the doctrine of the Church has been properly explained, it is never offensive and seldom unattractive. The spirit that came to scoff, remains to pray. For the unspoiled soul almost inevitably recognizes in the Church's teaching, a beauty, a dignity, an inspiration, such as is possessed only by the things of God. Catholic doctrine and Catholic practice with regard to the saints eventually manifest their power to lift our souls high up into the world of heroic holiness and to fasten us with cords of kinship to the most exalted spirits that have ever existed on this globe.

SACRED MEMORIES

That therefore is the first function the Church fulfills for the saints—*she keeps them in men's minds*. But for her, there would be no green memories of the wonderful beings who pioneered the progress and captained the battles and freed the peoples of the moral world,—those shining personifications of every manly and womanly virtue; those spirits, daring, yet modest, who flung fortune and life so recklessly away in the service of God and neighbor; those hardy warriors, those wise counsellors, those patient craftsmen, who won their way to success and glory through the same struggles and problems and labors that harass us. God be praised, that the remembrance of them lives! We of the present time know them by name and by characteristic. We call them our own and feel

that they look upon us as theirs. Frequently it seems as if from a past age and out of the invisible world a strong hand were stretched forth to rescue us from mortal peril. For the memory of the saints makes us realize, in the hardest of our trials, that we are required to do and to bear only what has been done and borne before—done and borne perfectly, divinely, by men and women rather like ourselves.

This office then, the Church well performs. She keeps the saints in mind; she will not let them be forgotten by her children. Rightly or wrongly, we Catholics are sometimes accused of giving exaggerated honor to the saints; but neither rightly nor wrongly can we ever be accused of ignoring them. The Church sees to it that we cannot overlook their names or virtues, or mode of life, or manner of death. Is it not fair to ask these two questions: Who but her has cared to keep the memory of the saints in the minds of men? *Who else could have succeeded?*

A PAGAN ATMOSPHERE

And how much we need these reminders of holy lives,—we men and women who sometimes are tempted to think that all is wrong and everyone evil. The world is too much with us; Heaven and God are so far away. It is difficult enough for the children of the twentieth century to realize that once upon a time there actually was a race of pre-historic men. Yet, there is something much harder than this, namely, for men and women living in this

present visible, material world to realize the facts and processes of the unseen life of the spirit. God, sin, heaven, hell, the supremacy of conscience, the value of the Cross, the approach of judgment—who is constantly aware of these things amid the cares and labors and interests of common daily life?

Consider our common experience. We come in contact with material objects at every turn; we desire them; we strive for them; we suffer, if we gain them not. We breathe a pagan atmosphere. We brush elbows with people who say this world is all and man had better make the most of it. We are distressed by the sight of a thousand gay-hearted sinners who, while indulging themselves, laugh mockingly at our vain efforts to resist temptation. At times the whole human race seems to have consecrated itself to the pursuit of pleasure and to have rejected the things of God; or at least it is only the weak, the unsuccessful, the unhappy who share our views and who let opportunities of sensual enjoyment slip by, for the sake of the spiritual return which to all appearance may never come.

FOR OUR ENCOURAGEMENT

What help now, if before our eyes there appear the figures of a countless host, who have found life in death, who have gained a better world by relinquishing this lower, who having walked for a day in the ways of sorrow have entered then upon the paths of endless peace and joy! That multitudes

have thus tested the worth of sacrifice and demonstrated the truth of Christ's promises, is a fact that cannot be forgotten while the Church retains the power to lift up her voice and to proclaim the glories of her saints. That the same road they followed still opens invitingly to us, that to us is extended the same divine guarantee of success, that they who have already attained are no strange beings of superior race, but elder brothers and sisters of our own, come back now, to guide and assist us—this is the burden of the Church's teaching; this is the encouragement and support received by each child of the Church who listens to the lesson set for his instruction.

THE WEAKER BRETHREN

From the example of saints who once were sinners a special help is derived. Small encouragement comes to the ordinary man from the achievements of a genius. If I am a weakling born, an athlete encourages me not at all, with his show of extraordinary strength. The ponderous learning of a scholar may awaken the wonder of ignorant men; it will hardly inspire their emulation. We need to know what has been done by those whose equipment was the same as ours. That I may rise from this low level where now I lie, unhappy and despairing; that I may set out boldly for the heights, with faith in the power of God to do great and holy things even with weaklings and defectives like me,—I need to have before me a picture,

not of the spiritual hero begotten upon the mountain tops and strengthened with pure air from the very moment of birth, but rather of the slow climbing son of the valley who toilsomely, timidly, with frequent missteps and many a fall, has crept up from crag to crag, until at last, perhaps, at the very moment of death, he has attained the height of perfection. What encourages us most is to see heaven's radiant halo on the face of him who once was a sinner groveling in the filth of cesspools.

PENITENT SINNERS

Some may be fired with enthusiasm when men appear as angels, set beyond the reach of temptation and capable of superhuman deeds. But many of us would never have been awakened from despair, were it not for the splendid vision of the penitent saints. Treachery, ingratitude, violated trust and broken pledges, crimes of passion and of blood, brutal selfishness and incredible blasphemy—to each pardoned sin, we cry: “*O Felix Culpa!*” A saint has risen from the depths into which I have fallen. There is no stain upon my soul that was not once upon his, or hers. This quaking heart, these stumbling feet, these dim eyes, this palsied hand, this momentary hopelessness of pardon—the Church tells me that a saint was no stranger to these, and bids me not despair. The blessed penitent saints of God, David and Peter and Paul, Magdalen and Augustine! they pray for me as I rise to my feet; they hold and steady me as I pain-

fully begin to walk in unaccustomed ways of holiness.

WE WHO SUFFER

Wider even than the reach of grievous sin is the reach of suffering. Who gets to his grave without a scar? It is not easy to kiss the chastening rod, to accept pain submissively, to go forward bravely to meet it when it bars the path of duty. The temptation to run away from suffering that can be avoided only at the cost of sin, or to rebel furiously against the pain that falls upon us while we are unselfishly doing our duty, is a severe testing of the soul—but it is a testing which nearly all must undergo. Now there is no phase of endurance, no kind or degree of suffering that has not been nobly illustrated by the patience of the saints. To those even who seemed to be without sin, to those who were closest in likeness to His Son, God permitted the cruel visitation to come. In our darkest hour, in our bitterest pain, the Church reminds us of this—reminds us, too, that, in the event, the suffering was shown to be a means of happiness and that, looking back, each saint finally saw—as we shall see, if we are faithful—how truly divine love had inspired the law which laid pain upon the human heart.

OUR FRIENDS, THE SAINTS

Who then shall forbid us to call them ours—these friends of God who have gone before us sealed with the sign of peace? Shall we not treas-

ure their relics and invoke their intercession? Shall we not paint their pictures to hang before our eyes and be framed in our memories? Surely so! May their names be upon our lips right frequently! As patrons of our children and our houses, of our churches and institutions, of our cities and our States, let us give them honor,—as in the good days of old when to be a saint was in every corner of Christendom the one undisputed title to profound veneration, and to perpetual remembrance.

A SAD MISTAKE

Is it not clear as noonday that a great blessing was foregone, and a strong light darkened, when Christian Europe which from the beginning had held the saints in high esteem, allowed their shrines in many places to be destroyed, their images to be profaned, their memories to be given over to oblivion? And are we not comforted by the knowledge that in large measure the saints seem now to be coming into their own again?—to be a mighty influence for good in the individual life of the Christian, and to be another proof to the world of the wisdom of that Mother who learned the secrets of pedagogy not from scientific analysis and laboratory experiments, but from the whispered instructions of Her Divine Master, when He sent her forth to teach in His name and by His methods all the nations of the world. Small wonder that we invoke them, kneeling before their images and their tombs. Small wonder that we believe in the

efficacy of their intercession before the throne of God,—for they are near and dear disciples of the Christ Who taught men to love, to assist, and to pray for one another; Who so quickly relieved suffering in response to the appeal of mother or father or sister or friend; and Who gave men both a compelling example and a positive command to follow in His footsteps. It is to the saints who resemble Him that we lift our prayer, asking for their intercession in our behalf.

THE HOLY SOULS

The Communion of Saints has another important aspect. It implies an intimate and enduring relationship not only between God's children on earth and His other children in glory, but also between living men and women and the departed spirits now in a state of suffering. These are on their way to eternal happiness, but they have not yet arrived. In the language of the Liturgy, they are the Holy Souls in Purgatory. With bleeding feet they tread the rough ascent to the City of God. With bowed head and stricken breast they must still bewail the sins which have weakened and defiled their earthly lives. Wrapped in annealing flames which work out the measure of God's justice, they stretch forth feeble hands and lift up weak voices in a cry for aid. And this aid we can give them. For here again, a Catholic doctrine,—as startling as it is appealing,—lays down the rule that we living children of God's family can assist

our dead. Prayers and good deeds, offered in their behalf, avail for the lessening of their affliction. The cup of cold water given in their name, the disappointment or hardship, for their dear sake endured, the act of worship or the humble petition offered in their behalf—all these are accepted by God. How comforting is this, and how inspiring! Can one imagine a doctrine that would give greater consolation to the living bereft of those they love, or an opportunity that would better inspire us to enthusiastic, unselfish heroism? For this teaching persuades us that as long as life lasts we can work and pray and labor for our dear ones dead.

HUMAN SERVICE

From another point of view again, the doctrine of the Communion of Saints possesses practical importance. Based on the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Christ, it points clearly to the universal brotherhood of man,—nay, history already records its generous contribution of unlimited love. Never perfectly realized to be sure, visible only in dim outline, the ideal has been suggested and foreshadowed. For this at least is true,—that the disciples of the doctrine we are considering have fashioned a brotherhood impatient of every barrier of time and space and class, have created a kinship which ramifies into every nation and every century, and are now laboring to create a single union of sympathy and service and love, wide as the margins of humanity.

SUPERNATIONALISM

Here then, in this ideal is visible an energy capable of welding the bonds of a universal human relationship and creating a consciousness of unity incompatible with hatred and war. In fact, no other ideal seems able to attain the level of a supernational unity while still preserving all that is wholesome in nation and family and individual. Those alone may dare to speak of universal brotherhood and to labor cheerfully in the cause of unending peace, who in their common worship enshrine saints as far apart in time and space and race and quality as Mary and Agnes, Sebastian and Augustine, Francis, Aquinas and Ignatius, Kateri of the Mohawks and the two Teresas,—Henry of Germany, Edward of England, Louis of France and Stephen of the Magyars.

For see what happens. Unselfish consecration to the service of humanity becomes a Catholic instinct. Quite simply and unaffectedly lepers are cared for by humble saints. The orphan, the sick poor and the aged keep as their servants gentle refined women who live in poverty and self-denial. The savage tribes of the Caribbean and of Central Africa have the Gospel preached to them by men who for the privilege of preaching not seldom pay the price of suffering and torture, or at least of early death. Never may an idealist who speaks of service decently forget the range and depth of the consecration that was and is and ever shall be char-

acteristic of the Church which teaches the doctrine of the Communion of Saints.

A COMPELLING VISION

Hold in honor then, this ideal of perfect fellowship. It brings men together from the four quarters of the globe, out of every nation and tribe and people and tongue. It links the ancient and the mediæval world with ours, and this present generation with countless millions still unborn. And it unites all in one fast association of love and service perfect beyond the wildest dream of the humanitarian. It allows the strength of God's holy ones to be borrowed by the weak-hearted and the stumbling sinner. It sends forth into the barren land of the Hereafter relief expeditions, bearing cool water and refreshing food. It does all these things in the name of God, our Father, and by the Grace of Christ, our Elder Brother. Is it not a vision of compelling beauty? Is it not a doctrine magnificently divine? And shall we not, each one, recognizing it for what it is, proclaim with deep conviction, "I, too, believe in the Communion of Saints"?

